

SOME PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC POLICY AND THE MEAT-GRAIN
INTERFACE IN THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES*

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It is well-known to us all that there once was written a book entitled How To Win Friends and Influence People. What is less well-known is that there is also a book called How To Lose Friends and Alienate People. It is a light and laughable parody of the more famous volume. Each chapter gives step-by-step instructions in social misbehavior in order that the reader might accomplish the title objective. For example, a chapter on Dining Out For The Last Time instructs the guest to sip the host's wine, swish it like mouthwash, swallow, make a wry face and remark "I guess it'll be a long time before they get good wine in this country."

I bring all this to your attention because I am afraid what I say may cause me to lose friends and alienate people, and I want to absolve from blame an author and an innocent book as possible sources which inspired me to remark on things a guest might leave unsaid. You see, I have managed to make my task unfortunate by choosing to bring to your attention some inconsistencies in your concern about problems at the Meat-Grain Interface. There are inconsistencies, after all, between your identities as Canadians and your motives as businessmen. There

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are always inconsistencies between social and economic considerations; the only thing remarkable at all is their particular character in a particular setting, and I have chosen to remark on them in the context of Canadians at the Meat-Grain Interface.

But, I am not inspired to lose friends and alienate people. I have been enjoying Canadian friendships for more than twenty years and I do not in the least wish to lose my status as a welcome guest in the home of preferred hosts. So my observations are those, I hope, of a well-behaved guest commenting on the remarkable characteristics of his hosts commendable neighborhood.

Yes, there are conflicts. And sometimes they are brought into the open in surprising ways. Several years ago Charles DeGaulle came to Quebec and offered French endorsement for separatism. Even on the U. S. side of the border this extraordinary conduct was regarded as uncommonly graceless behavior. But what Charles DeGaulle was doing was pointing out the commonality of the culture shared by Frenchmen in France and in Quebec, and he was entirely accurate. What caused resentment was the audacity with which he meddled in the political affairs of a sovereign nation. Hence, the political idea of nationality can conflict with the social concept of culture. Canadians are proud of their nationality and they don't like outsiders tampering with their national identity, and very shortly I am going to demonstrate that to you--right here in this audience.

I recall another illustration of the conflict between political identity and social and economic ideas. I attended a purebred cattle sale in southern Alberta several years ago. The prices were impressive, but the attendance was even more impressive. Everybody who was anybody

in the Charolais business was there; and I mean everybody from Edmonton to El Paso, and everybody from the Rocky Mountains to the Midwest. They were all friends; Brothers-in-the-Bond; they all knew each other and there were no state or provincial boundaries. There was no international difference either. There was only sameness. There was no such thing there as Alberta or Montana or Texas. There was no Canada there, either, and no United States and no France. Nationality was buried entirely under the overwhelming common interest in (French) Charolais cattle. An entire society, a common culture, a brotherhood was represented there, built upon the minds and hearts of the rangeland cattle industry.

Go East from western Alberta and Montana and you find another agricultural culture that spans the international boundary. It's the small-grain and oilseed industry. It's the heart of National Farmers Union country, and NFU membership is widespread on both sides of the border. And there is more difference between those cattlemen and those NFU members East and West than there is difference between Canadians and Americans within those cultures North and South. And those grain producers and cattlemen do not have widely different views because someone is right and someone else is wrong. They have different attitudes because they have different problems.

When you stop and think about it, the economic similarities between the United States and Canada are so great that the conflict between Canadian economics and Canadian politics is severely tested. Canadians have a favorite indoor and outdoor sport. They like to complain about being a U. S. colony. They call themselves the 51st state. And you folks in the Prairies Provinces like to feel hurt and believe that you are held in colonial bondage by the big Eastern provinces. You're

schizophrenic. One week you're the 51st state and want border protections and to hell with Americans and the next week you want more free trade with the U. S. (and to hell with Canada). There really is a conflict between economics and politics in Canada. It is really true that if you really want free trade with the U. S. you almost do have to say to hell with Canada.

I guess for sheer audacity I can outdo Charles DeGaulle. Why don't we just pull the string out of the fabric; this artificial nonsense about an international boundary between two countries. Let's make one country out of it. It makes good economic sense. It makes good political sense, too. Instead of just sitting up here fussing about the U. S. you could be down there in Washington doing something about it.

Does all this sound appalling to you? Well, come now, consider it. You wouldn't be a 51st state. You'd be at least one state for each province, and each territory would be a potential state. For that matter, you could propose as many states as you want. And you'd get good representation. You have 10 percent the population of the U. S. That means that in Congress you would have 10 percent of the House of Representatives. Even better, each state gets two senators regardless of population and, with 10 states, you could have 20 percent of the Senate. You'd have tremendous political clout compared to none if you were inside the United States instead of out of it. With representation like that, and with similar agricultural interests in a lot of low population western states sharing your views you probably would get a lot better hearing in Washington than you've ever had in Ottawa.

While we're at it, let's reconstruct the British Empire. It was probably the greatest political accomplishment in the history of mankind. Let's get all the Commonwealth Countries back together under one government. The idea of sovereign nations in today's small world is obsolete anyway. Let's get England and Australia and New Zealand and Canada and all the rest and just make one big nation out of it. Just shift the headquarters from London to Washington, and put the whole thing all back together again. Probably scare the hell out of the Russians.

There, now, I've gone and out-done Charles DeGaulle; and with a better plan, too.

Now let me see your hands. All of you in favor of this idea please raise your hands. Nobody? One? What's the matter?

Well do this for me: All of you who feel a slow burn inside, feel offended, and resent me, even a little, for coming up here from south of the border and suggesting you quit being Canada and join the United States--all of you who feel that way, would you please raise your hands? There, now! Aha! Hands up all over the room. So you like Canada. You like the notion of preserving a nation called Canada. You are nationalistic. You are patriotic. I like to see all those hands up in the air. I like it for two reasons: One is that I like the notion of a nation called Canada, too. I'm enthusiastic about it. Canada is the best neighbor any country in the world could hope to have; the U. S. is fortunate to have a neighbor like Canada. But I like to see those hands in the air for another reason, too. Since I know now that you like Canada so well I can begin to make some progress with this problem at the Meat-Grain Interface.

If you like the notion of a nation named Canada and you want to keep it in one piece then I think you have a very tough job on your hands and it's time for me to give you some reasons why:

(1) One of the great and thoughtful authors and observers of the American historical scene and the progress of American development was a Harvard professor of journalism named Bernard DeVoto. In one of his books he made what I thought was a remarkably insightful observation; he commented on how fortunate the United States was that its political, its economic, and its geographic boundaries were all the same. It was very conducive, he pointed out, to national unity, and he illustrated this advantage by comparing the United States to less fortunate countries obliged to labor under the burden of disparate geographic, economic and political boundaries.

Canada is one of those countries less fortunate than the United States in this respect. Political, geographic and economic boundaries do not neatly coincide. This causes problems. The problems corrode the national identity and erode the national unity.

(2) There is not the sense of national unity in Canada that there is in the United States. Canada is just an idea and an argument, centered on the north side of lakes Erie and Ontario, and surrounded by a loose confederation of provinces. The United States has 50 states and it is taken for granted in every state that there is a union and that the states are unified. Nobody in the world would dare be offensive to any one state without offending the other 49. Nobody can stake out even one remote Aleutian Island without having folks as far away as Arkansas or Alabama ready to fight about it. In contrast, in this loose confederation

of provinces called Canada each province is very aware of its identity as a province and very willing to advocate the welfare of that province even at the expense, if necessary, of the other provinces. Here in Alberta you constantly confirm the truth of this by your consistent desire for more trade with the states and your abiding suspicion that you are exploited by other provinces in the East. There is no place in the United States--no section and no state--that ever conveys such ill-will toward another state as southern Alberta repeatedly conveys toward Quebec. Yet I strongly suspect that if you would listen to what Quebec is saying, if you would hear the substance of its complaint you would find in that message more to like than to dislike; the substance of the complaints in Quebec, it seems to me, an outsider, is much the same as the substance of the complaints in Alberta. Even northern and southern Alberta are divided. Calgary has a new zoo. They put a fence around Edmonton. Even in this series of conferences here today the purpose of the gathering of the prairie provinces is discussion of the issues which divide you.

(3) There is a third difficulty in the matter of keeping Canada together. Generally, there is much similarity on each side of the border. Per capita income is about the same, consumption habits are much the same; lifestyles are the same; the monetary system is the same; government is quite similar; the credit cards in your pocket or mine would serve about as well on either side of the border. But because everything is the same on a per capita basis, everything is 10 times larger on the U. S. side of the border because population is 10 times larger. Consequently, Canadians are extremely well informed about what's going on in the United States but U. S. citizens are almost totally ignorant

about what goes on in Canada. It occurs to me that this is true for two reasons. (a) The first is that everyone--individuals and societies--in their concern for their survival, need to be informed about what's going on that could affect their future, the circumstances surrounding their survival. In Canada you need to know what goes on in the U. S. because almost anything the U. S. economy does will affect the Canadian economy. It's ten times bigger. But about the only thing Canada does to affect the U. S. economy is blow cold air at it. So, all that most Americans know about Canada is that's where cold weather comes from. They think it's full of trees and everybody shoots a moose for breakfast. An Alberta friend of mine was in South Carolina last summer. He took his car to a garage and the mechanics gathered round. They asked him if many Canadians owned cars. When he said yes they asked him what they did with them. (b) A second reason why Canadians know the U. S. and the U. S. doesn't know Canada is because both educational systems in both countries, from grade one through college, use American textbooks--full of American illustrations and American data and American examples. There is no way that any educated Canadian can avoid an understanding of the United States. And by the same token there is almost no way an educated American can avoid ignorance about Canada. So American ignorance about Canada is embarrassing and frustrating and a legitimate basis for genuine Canadian resentment toward the United States. But the ignorance is understandable.

Now what is important is the punchline in this observation: it relates to your difficulties about keeping Canada in one piece. While Canadians understand the States, and Americans understand the States, who understands Canada? Americans don't. But the point is, neither do Canadians. The whole educational system has been devoted to educating

everybody about the United States. Consequently, Canadians are not nearly as well informed about Canada as the citizens south of the border are about the United States. If you want to keep your own show together you better work a little harder learning how it works and what it takes. I don't think you can afford the luxury of taking potshots at a third of your population because it speaks French. I don't think you can afford the luxury of fretting about colonial bondage to the Eastern provinces. I don't think you can afford the luxury of panting for more free trade with the United States. I don't think you can afford the luxury of resisting rail line abandonment. I don't think you can afford the luxury of throwing rocks at each other about Crowsnest Rates. Not if you want to keep your show together.

(4) I think there is a fourth difficulty you face in preserving and nourishing Canada. A map of Canada gives a very distorted, very misleading notion of what Canada is all about. The map shows a huge piece of real estate; more square miles than all 50 states. But that is such an unimportant piece of information that anyone who attaches any importance to it has allowed his mind to be diverted completely from facts of Canadian survival that are critically important. Remember, your political, economic, and geographic boundaries are not the same. What counts is where the people and the action are. And where are they? Compared to the geographic magnitude of the country, everything that counts is all packed down along the southern edge, next to the U. S. border. As the moon is held by the gravity of earth, or iron filings are held by a magnet, the Canadian economy is clutched by the gravity of the immensely larger economy just below the border. If you draw a line around the bulk of Canadian people and money, the map of Canada shows a country that looks like a fresh green bean stretched along the north side of

the U. S. border. Canada is an East-West country. You cannot have a political system without an economic system to support it. An East-West political identity requires East-West economic activity to sustain it.

(5) There is yet another difficulty. The long, thin, East-West shape of Canada is not of one piece. The green bean is sliced in many parts. It is sliced by geography, by climate, by culture and, consequently, even by politics. Consider the East-West continuity of Canada or, rather, the lack of it. It is broken once by the Rocky Mountains. British Columbia shares little in common with the prairie provinces. It is broken again, and broken soundly, where the tree-line crosses the international boundary. This happens not too far East of Winnipeg. I think of the tree-line as a sort of constant-climate line; it is the edge of agriculture and the beginning of grim wilderness, particularly in winter months. It extends diagonally southeast across the continent, bisecting the boundary and cutting through the upper peninsula of Michigan and then on across Ontario. It cuts the prairie provinces off from anything to the East. It sharply defines the eastern edge of the West. Along the north shore of Lake Superior the vastness of Canada, East and West, is held together through hundreds of miles of wilderness by the thinnest of economic strands; of highway, of railroad, of communication cable, of airlines. Further East Canada is cut again by the cultural uniqueness of Quebec and to the East of Quebec there is another barrier created partly by distinctive cultural differences in Quebec and the Maritimes and partly by the saltwater itself.

To have unity at all, because of where the people live, Canada is an East-West country. But maintaining that East-West unity is not without expense.

(6) In such a setting I see that Crow Rates serve an ancient, clever, entirely objective, and clearly rational purpose; they induce East-West

trade; they align economic activity to the support of a political idea
you have already told me you want to preserve. Given the gravitational pull of the U. S. economy, North-South trade is natural, and much of it occurs, but perhaps it carries with it the ultimately unaffordable political cost of lost national identity. (I am led by such thoughts to observe again that if you want more trade, and yet want the preservation of Canada, then let Americans ask for the trade and let Canada yield it grudgingly, on condition that Canadians be granted proportional voice in the political process.)

To further encourage that cumbersome and unnatural East-West trade pattern of Canadian commerce, certain tariff and non-tariff restrictions exist at the border. Sometimes you chaffe at the apparent unreasonableness of U. S. border restrictions that prevent a freer North-South trade. It is reasonable to suppose that however senseless some restrictions may be, there are people in the States who think they serve a useful purpose. But let me suggest something that might not have occurred to you: Don't you suppose there are people in Ottawa also who think those U. S. border barriers serve a very useful purpose? Surely there would have to be. Anyone devoted to the political preservation of Canada, and aware that much of it depends on an East-West trade flow to support it, would be grateful for any devices that would dampen the constant enthusiasm for more North-South trade.

So, yes, we can readily agree that Crow Rate subsidies create a problem at the Meat-Grain Interface: They make prairie grain prices artificially high, and with no comparable subsidies elsewhere they make livestock prices comparatively low; and feeding in the West becomes less attractive than feeding in the East. So everything moves East. And in

return you get agricultural supplies, farm machinery and other finished products shipped back West to you.

It is an ancient economic idea. It is called Mercantilism. It fostered the Age of Discovery. It was the economic rationale for centuries of worldwide colonialism: import raw products from the colonies, discourage colonial industry, and ship finished products back to the colonies. The consequence was a favorable balance of trade and the accumulation of wealth at the heart of the Empire. But the point is this: There IS an Empire!

Yes, the prairie provinces are colonies. Yes, East-West trade is an economic oddity. But these are political necessities. If you want to keep the show together. And you have told me that you do.

So, your problems at the Meat-Grain Interface in the prairie provinces are really not Canadian problems at all. In the name of Canada, which you assure me is a paramount consideration, the problem is maintaining the political and economic integrity of Canada. And one solution to that problem is subsidized freight rates. In this larger and more important perspective, this solution creates a troublesome inconvenience in the prairie provinces. But the difficulties at the Meat-Grain Interface are the consequence of something larger. They are a measure of the economic price that is paid for the purpose of sustaining a political preference so important that it is paramount.

There is more to holding a country together than singing Oh Canada and toasting the Queen before the banquet.